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UNCLAS ZAGREB 001756

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EUR/SCE (NARDI) AND EUR/ACE (HANSEN, ROBERTS)  
DEPARTMENT PASS TO USAID FOR EE/ECA (FARNSWORTH, CONVERY)

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SUBJECT: USAID-FUNDED PRE-ELECTION ACTIVITIES DELIVERING  
POSITIVE RESULTS

REF: ZAGREB 913

Summary

¶1. Croatia has made important progress on reforms since the elections in January 2000 brought an end to the nationalist regime of former President Tudjman's HDZ party. But this progress is fragile, and if the next parliamentary elections result in a government that is not committed to continuing these reforms, it could stall Croatia's movement toward accession into Euro-Atlantic institutions, a key USG goal for regional stability in Southeast Europe.

¶2. One of the challenges to the USG's SEED-funded democratic governance assistance programs is to ensure the reform process in Croatia continues by helping reform-oriented political parties succeed. To do this, USAID implementers are directed to assist parties in crafting messages that explain to voters how continued progress on reform is in their interest and also to appeal directly to citizens to participate in the electoral process. This strategy is working. Recent USAID-sponsored polls show that, with elections expected in late November 2003, it is likely that a coalition of reform-oriented political parties will be able to form a government committed to a progressive agenda. End Summary.

Political Environment for Assistance

¶3. Expectations of voters following the elections that brought Croatia's first coalition government to power in January 2000 were unrealistically high. Popular support for coalition parties began to slip when voters realized that it would take time for some reforms to show results. The results of local-level elections held in May 2001 confirmed this, and coalition party leaders were stunned by the strong showing of the nationalist, right-wing HDZ. USAID assistance programs implemented mainly by grantees National Democratic Institute and International Republic Institute are intended to help reform-oriented parties explain their successes and the benefits of remaining on the reform path.

NDI Assistance

¶4. NDI's program works on political party training, both at the central and local level. Croatia's current leadership has been frustrated by the public's persistent belief that there has been no progress toward making good on campaign promises. NDI is working with the leading coalition party to develop a communications strategy which explains the government's achievements over the past three years. In addition to its training program for members of Parliament, NDI is also helping parties develop better strategies to reach out directly to constituents.

¶5. During the campaign which brought the current coalition to government, NDI encouraged the development of a citizen action NGO, GONG. This NGO now serves as a sub-grantee supported by NDI to carry out a range of pre-election activities to get out the vote, especially important for strengthening the momentum for reform. GONG also holds "citizen hours" in communities around Croatia to bring citizens into direct contact with their elected officials at all levels. Response to this program has been excellent, and has enjoyed participation from all political levels, including President Mesic.

IRI Assistance

¶6. IRI assistance has had the highest public profile since it works not only with political party spokespeople but with journalists as well. IRI's in-depth political polling has become invaluable to reform-oriented political parties as they make their appeals to voters. Top U.S. political analysts help parties decide -- using extensive polls -- which campaign issues will be most resonant with voters and then help parties develop messages which will encourage

voters to continue to support reform-oriented parties.

17. IRI completed its second in a series of three polls in late June 2003. The first poll served as a "wake-up call" to

coalition parties who began -- finally -- to heed advice of U.S. consultants. They took responsibility for not fulfilling voter expectations, and then began to systematically explain their government's achievements of the past three years. Coalition political leaders have focused on issues they knew (based on poll results) resonated with voters, like improving the tourism industry, transportation infrastructure and making progress toward membership in the EU. The second IRI poll shows that this message is getting through and that support for coalition parties is increasing.

18. U.S. analysts presented the data to the senior levels of Croatia's leading political parties. They explained the poll's most significant results: the coalition-leading SDP has begun to gain ground on the opposition HDZ, which has become stagnant. Undecided voters have begun to lean toward coalition parties, and the key indicator, the number of respondents who think the Government is leading Croatia in the "right direction," is on the rise.

19. The poll showed that the majority of undecided voters -- still over twenty percent -- are women or younger voters, the natural constituency of reform-oriented parties. The opposition-leading HDZ has not branched out from its core constituents of older, less-educated, rural voters and the percentage of undecided voters who declared that they would never vote for the HDZ is high. The bottom line, according to IRI analysts, is that a return of a coalition similar to the current lineup of political parties and excluding the HDZ is very likely.

Comment

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10. We are pleased that coalition parties took the advice of our USAID-funded experts and also that the advice had such immediate and positive results. Coalition party leaders have become confident that they will return to government after elections in November, but we continue to warn against complacency. We will continue to urge reform-minded parties to focus their message on how continued progress on reforms will help them achieve their long-term goals.

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